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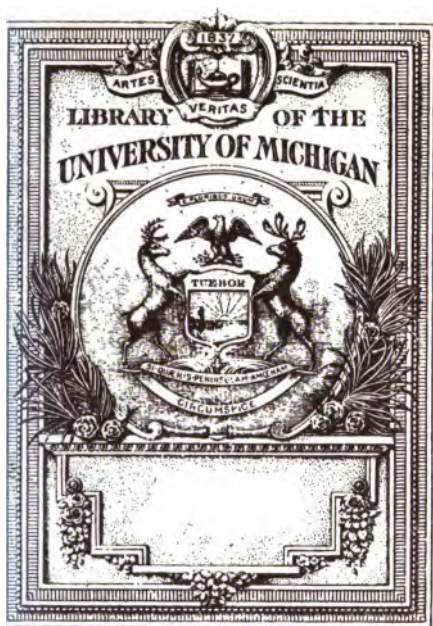


E PLEASURES, DANGERS
AND USES
OF
SULTORY READING

BY

THE EARL OF IDDESLEIGH





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ON
DESULTORY READING.





THE PLEASURES THE DANGERS
AND THE USES
OF
DESULTORY READING

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BY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE

THE EARL OF IDDESLEIGH

Northcote, Stafford H.



LONDON
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additions.*

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THIS Discourse was read by the Earl of Iddesleigh, Lord Rector of the University of Edinburgh, in the United Presbyterian Synod-hall; the first of a series of Addresses to the Students, on November 3, 1885.







Introduction.

GENTLEMEN,



WHEN I had the honour of addressing you on the occasion of my inauguration, I expressed a hope that it might be in my power to visit you again in the course of my term of office, so that the intercourse between your Rector and the great body of students might not be limited to the single address which custom prescribed, and which has, I think, usually furnished the only opportunity for our being brought together. I expressed this hope knowing that under any circumstances I should feel the advantage of occasionally renewing my acquaintance with the University. But since the time to which I refer much has happened

to increase—if I may use the phrase, to intensify—the feelings of regard and of kindly goodwill which were engendered at our first meeting. We have rejoiced together, and we have sorrowed together. We rejoiced in the interesting proceedings which attended the celebration of the tercentenary. We sorrowed at the common loss which we sustained in the death of our esteemed and distinguished friend, the late Principal. I should be wanting in all right feeling if I did not take this opportunity of again bearing my testimony to the high qualities and the eminent services of Sir Alexander Grant.

I have referred to the links in the chain of affection which I hope binds us together, but there is still another matter upon which I am anxious to say a few words, and which brings us more directly to the business of this evening. Within the last two years the students of this University have done much to quicken and to develop what I may call the University life. You have felt that, in

order to gain the full advantages which these seats of learning are able to offer, it is necessary for you to adopt some method of common action, to set on foot an organization capable of promoting you in the means of expressing your wants, and of taking steps to supply them. To this movement, as I understand, we are to attribute your coming together to-night; and I trust I am a good augur when I foretell that this meeting will be followed by many more, at which you will have the benefit of valuable lectures by eminent men upon the various subjects of interest upon which they will be able to address you. It is a wise idea, and I trust it will not only deserve, but command success.

Gentlemen, you have done me the honour to ask me to open the ball, and to deliver something in the nature of a lecture. If I had had more command of my time, and could have given to any subject which I might have selected the study which a man ought to give before he presumes to appear



in public as a lecturer, I would gladly have made the attempt ; but it is not so, and I feel that I must ask your indulgence if I shrink from the inspiriting call which would bid me soar with the Dircæan swan, and content myself with a humbler imitation of the Matinian bee. Alike in the subject which I shall choose, and in the mode of handling it which I shall adopt, I shall endeavour to avoid the charge of presumption, and I therefore trust that I may disarm criticism and escape the mortification of ill-success. I shall not attempt to tread the high paths of science, or to enter far into the domain of philosophy. Neither shall I adventure upon the more elevated regions of literature or seek to explore the temples of the Muses. My theme will be the pleasures, the dangers, and the uses of what is commonly called desultory reading, and I hope to be allowed to decline for my address the more pretentious title of a lecture, and to describe it rather as a desultory discourse. Not that I regard

NOT


desultory reading as unworthy of philosophical examination, nor desultory study as a contradiction in terms, though some might be disposed to call it so. I can well understand that severe critics might be tempted to apply to me the line of Terence, quoted by Horace, in which the wiser slave tells his young master that love, having in itself neither reason nor judgment, cannot be treated by counsel and by argument ; and that I might be told that desultory work was at best only to be tolerated and was certainly quite unworthy of serious discussion. I dissent altogether from such a theory as that, and I shall try before we have done to set before you some considerations to show not only the charms but also the utility of the desultory method.







*On the Pleasures, the Dangers, and the
Uses of Desultory Reading.*

OU are, I doubt not, familiar with the distinction between deductive and inductive reasoning. It always seems to me that the severer method of study is the more applicable to the former, and the lighter or desultory method to the latter. The continuous reader will make the better progress in reasoning and in drawing deductions from given premisses. The desultory reader will, or may, succeed more effectually in cultivating the faculty of observation and in collecting the materials which must form the foundation for the inductive science.

As regards the comparative pleasures and

14 *On the Pleasures, the Dangers, and*

advantages of close and of desultory study I would liken the one to a journey by railway, the other to a journey on horseback. The railway will take you more rapidly to your journey's end, and by its aid you will get over much more ground in the day; but you will lose the variety of the walk up the hill, the occasional divergence from the hard road, and the opportunities for examining the country through which you are passing, which the horseman enjoys. The business man will prefer the train, which will carry him quickly to his bank or his warehouse, but he will miss many things which the other will have seen and profited by, provided, of course, that he has made good use of his faculty of observation.

For it is on such a proviso as this that the case of the desultory worker really turns. He must not be a loiterer, shuffling out of the trouble to which his more methodical comrades put themselves. He must have an object in view, and he must not allow

himself to lose sight of it. We are not to confound desultory work with idleness.

It is useful to look to the origin of words. The word desultory is of Latin parentage, and it was applied by the Romans to describe the equestrian jumping actively from one steed to another in the circus, or even, as was the case with the Numidians, from one charger to another, in the midst of battle. That certainly was no idle loitering. It was energetic activity, calculated to keep the mind and the body very much alive indeed. That should be the spirit of the desultory reader. His must be no mere fingering of books without thought how they are to be turned to account. He may be wise in not allowing himself to become a bookworm, but he must take care not to become what is much worse—a book butterfly. Whatever is worth doing is worth doing well, and it is possible so to regulate and pursue a seemingly desultory course of reading as to render it more truly beneficial than an apparently deeper and severer method of study.

This world of ours is an old world, full of the works and records of many generations. We are in daily contact with the fragments of the past, with traces here and remains there which attract our attention, either for their intrinsic beauty or utility, or as indications of the manners and habits of mankind in former ages. Among these records assuredly there are none which are of greater interest or of higher value than the records, mere fragments though they may often be, of human history and human thought which are to be found in books. The poet tells us how we may so read the great book of nature that we may find in the trees, the stones, the running brooks, lessons which may profit as much as sermons. But while cordially accepting this teaching, we may observe that the trees and the brooks would hardly convey all those useful lessons to us if we had not a considerable knowledge of books to begin with. The lover of nature will find much revealed to him which the mere book-

worm will wholly fail to notice ; but, on the other hand, a well-read man who can apply the teaching of his books to the objects which he has around him will profit far more from them than his illiterate companion.

I do not, however, desire to dwell on what may be considered little more than a truism. What I wish to point out to you is that so great is the mass of our book-heritage that it is absolutely impossible for any one, and doubly impossible for one who has other engagements in life, to make himself acquainted with the hundredth part of it. So that our choice lies for the most part between ignorance of much that we would greatly like to know and that kind of acquaintance which is to be acquired only by desultory reading.

When I say this, I do not forget that a third alternative may be offered to us. We may be told that, though we have not time to read the books themselves, we have always the means of becoming acquainted with their contents by the aid of abstracts, abridgments,

and other convenient instruments for the close packing of information. Nobody is more ready than I am to acknowledge the utility of these pieces of intellectual mechanism. They are most valuable for reference, and are often indispensable for saving time. But to regard them as equivalent to, or even as a decent substitute for, the books themselves would be a fatal error. They serve the purpose which is served by a dictionary, and if, as Charles Lamb maintains, dictionaries are not to be reckoned as books, so neither are these compressed masses of information to be admitted to that honourable title.

I may have occasion to return to this point and to offer a few remarks on the question of cramming, but for the moment my object is to eliminate this kind of false study from the comparison which I am anxious to draw between the sustained and the desultory methods of true study. With regard to those two methods I will, in the first place, observe

that, to speak generally, the world has need of them both. We need students who will give themselves up to strictly limited subjects of study, will pursue them with all their heart and mind and strength, and with that great kind of devotion which we may call students' love. These must be men animated by the spirit of our old giants of learning, of whose powers of reading we hear so much, and of whose powers of writing we see remaining so many substantial proofs. Yet even with these men the intermixture of some general and desultory reading is necessary, both for the very purposes of their study and in order to relieve the strain of the mind and to keep it in a healthy condition.

I never read so many novels in succession as during the months that I was working for my degree at the rate of ten or twelve hours a day; and in the week when I was actually under examination I read through the *Arabian Nights* in the evenings. I forget who the great Judge was who, being asked as

to his reading, answered that he read nothing but law and novels. But there is plenty of literature besides novels, and besides the *Arabian Nights*, which will be good for the relaxation of the mind after severe study, and I venture to think that the more miscellaneous our selection is the more agreeable, as well as more profitable, it will be. So much for the consideration of one's own mental health. But beyond that I think it is evident that a certain amount of miscellaneous reading is of great importance to the student in relation to his main study itself. Illustrations of his work will be presented to him often from the most unexpected quarters, will sometimes cheer and lighten his labour, and sometimes very usefully supply hints for further or wholly different lines of inquiry.

As I said just now, for inductive reasoning we need a wide field, where we may pick up materials which may suggest new starting-points in the process of discovery. The student who is also something of a man of

the world will often go further than the man who shuts out the light of day that he may give himself wholly to his folio and his lamp :—

“ Study is like the heaven’s glorious sun,
That will not be deep-search’d with saucy looks :
Small have continual plodders ever won,
Save base authority from others’ books.
These earthly godfathers of heaven’s lights,
That give a name to every fixèd star,
Have no more profit of their shining nights
Than those that walk and wot not what they are.
Too much to know, is to know nought but fame ;
And every godfather can give a name.”

There is a good deal of wisdom in these sarcastic lines, which Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Birón in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. It is the wisdom of the student who is also a man of the world, and who looks suspiciously or contemptuously on

“ The bookful blockhead, ignorantly read,
With loads of learned lumber in his head.”

I might occupy a good deal of your time if I were to set myself to bring together all the

judgments that I could find in our great literary works against the pedant. But it would be somewhat beside my mark ; for there may be desultory readers who deserve the name of pedant as much as and more than those cloistered toilers who are chained to the desk by the love of a study itself, who have no thought or wish to parade themselves and their acquirements before the world, and to seek for praise and admiration for their learning. Chaucer's scholar, who would

“ lever have at his beddes hed
Twentie bookes clothed in blak or red,
Of Aristotle and of his philosophie,
Than robès rich, or fidel, or sautrie,”

had not a touch of the pedant about him. Indeed, I doubt whether any true lover of learning for its own sake can ever deserve that unpleasant appellation.

But, as you have often been told, *Studia abeunt in mores*, and it is with a view to give you some hints as to the effects of particular methods of study upon your habits and your

character that I am now inviting your attention to systems of reading. In the first place, I would offer a plea in favour of desultory reading—at least, of a certain amount of it—because it leaves a man more at liberty to pursue the particular line which suits his taste and his capacity. This is, I suppose, the ground on which Dr. Johnson commended the practice. “I would not advise,” he says, “a rigid adherence to a particular plan of study. I myself have never persisted in any plan for two days together. A man ought to read just as inclination leads him, for what he reads as a task will do him little good.” Bacon, too, in his well-known essay, tells that there are some books to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few only to be read wholly and with diligence and attention. Both these high authorities therefore recognize the propriety of leaving the student some latitude in his choice of books and in his method of reading. But while this freedom

is largely to be respected, it ought not to be allowed to degenerate into laxity. The tendency of a great many young men—and of old ones too, for that matter—is not only to read widely, but also to read indolently, and indolent reading is as much to be discouraged as diligent reading is to be commended.

There is a fine passage in Mr. Carlyle's inaugural address, when he was chosen Rector of this University. He says:—

“We ought to cast aside altogether the idea people have that if they are reading any book, that if an ignorant man is reading any book, he is doing rather better than nothing at all. I must entirely call that in question—I even venture to deny that. It would be very much safer and better for many to have no concern with books at all. There is a number, a frightfully increasing number, of books that are decidedly to the readers of them not useful; but an ingenious reader will learn also that a certain number of books were written by a supremely noble kind of

people; not a very great number of books, but still a number fit to occupy all your reading industry. Books are like men's souls, divided into sheep and goats. Some few are going up and carrying us up heavenwards, calculated, I mean, to be of priceless advantage in teaching, in forwarding the teaching of all generations. Others, a frightful multitude, are going down, down, doing ever the more and the wider mischief. Keep a strict eye on that latter class of books, and for the rest, in regard to all your studies and readings here and to whatever you may learn, you are to remember that the object is not particular knowledge, not that of getting higher and higher in technical perfection and all that sort of thing. There is a higher aim lying at the rear of all that, especially for those who are intended for literary or speaking pursuits, or the sacred profession. You are ever to bear in mind that there lies behind that the acquisition of what may be called wisdom—namely, sound appreciation

and just decision as to all the objects that come round you, and the habit of behaving with justice, candour, clear insight, and loyal adherence to fact. Great is wisdom, infinite is the value of wisdom. It cannot be exaggerated. It is the highest achievement of man. 'Blessed is he that getteth understanding.'"

You will, I think, have noticed at more than one point in this address that your late Rector's warning was directed as much to the manner as to the matter of your reading. It is not only, perhaps it is not so much, a question of what you read as of how you read it. Undoubtedly there are great and noble works, such as Mr. Carlyle probably had in his mind, which are qualified to produce a great effect and to lead the soul and the intellect distinctly heavenward, while there are undoubtedly some which have a decidedly noxious and baneful character. But the great mass of books are, like the great

mass of men, a mixture of good and evil, and are neither to be blindly followed nor blindly rejected. It would but narrow the mind in the first place ; and, depend upon it that from narrowing to perverting is but a short step. Hear the advice of a very wise counsellor, especially to youth, the late Dr. Arnold. He says,

“ Keep your view of men and things extensive, and depend upon it that a mixed knowledge is not a superficial one. As far as it goes, the views that it gives are true, but he who has read deeply one class of writers alone gets views which are almost sure to be perverted, and which are not only narrow but false. Adjust your proposed amount of reading to your time and inclination. This is perfectly free to any man ; but whether the amount be large or small let it be varied in its kind and widely varied. If I have a confident opinion on any one point connected with the improvement of the human mind, it is on this.”

If, then, we agree that the most important question is not what, but how we shall read, let us consider the dangers against which we must be on our guard. I have already touched upon that of indolence, even though it be busy indolence. There is another fault which we must avoid—that of misdirected energy, the energy of the unhappy student whom Mr. Lowell selects as the butt of his clever satire—

“A reading-machine ever wound up and going,
He mastered whatever was not worth the knowing.”

It is to men of this sort that the old proverb applies—they cannot see the wood for the trees. They are so intent upon details that they lose all idea of the whole, and for want of grasp of the whole they lose the benefit of the very details with which they are so energetically busy themselves. The remedy is not far to seek, and I may give it as a remedy applicable to both faults of which I have been speaking. It is, always to read with an object, and that a worthy object. Perhaps in

saying this I may lay myself open to the charge of opposing myself to that desultory reading of which I have been rather declaring myself a defender. But it is not really so, and there is no reason why a desultory reader should not be a reader with an object. He may be following up a train of thought which leads him to consult first one work and then another. He may be seeking for evidence of facts which can only be satisfactorily obtained by collating a great number of authorities, and he may be examining many books which he only knows by name to see whether they throw any light upon the subject of his researches. Not improbably while he is reading with such a purpose as that, and is looking a little below the surface of what he reads, he will, as it were, stumble on quite unexpected discoveries, such as the pedantic student who has devoted himself to the closest reading of which a machine is capable would never by any possibility have made. Lord Beaconsfield's favourite saying, that

adventures are for the adventurous, applies to the literary adventurer as much as to any other. Or, again, you may be reading with a view to discover the full meaning of an author who has obtained celebrity and who has exercised an important influence over the minds of men, or you may be studying mere style and power of expression, or you may be comparing an author's writing with what is known of the author's life—in short, there are endless subjects which you may be pursuing while you seem to be aimlessly turning over the leaves of one book after another, and to be wasting time which you are, in fact, employing most profitably as well as most diligently.

But there is yet an object with which a man may read, and with regard to which it is desirable that I should say a few words, because it connects itself with some very practical questions of the day. A man may read hard in order to “get up,” as it is called, some particular subject or subjects

for an examination. In short, he may give himself up to be "crammed," and cramming has now a very different significance from that which attached to the same process before the days of competitive examinations. In old times a man would cram in order to get admiration. Probably the less he knew the more he desired the reputation of knowledge, and in order to gain that reputation he was likely to try all manner of short cuts to it. Have you ever read the amusing account which Seneca gives of a wealthy man of this class—Calvisius Sabinus? This worthy had a large family of slaves and freedmen, and he was troubled with a short memory, so short, indeed, that he would confuse Achilles with Ulysses, and hopelessly forget Priam. Still he desired to appear learned, and he had the wit to discover a means. He laid out a large sum in the purchase of slaves, one of whom knew Homer from beginning to end, another Hesiod equally well, and nine others who

were thoroughly acquainted with as many great lyric poets. When he could not buy them ready made, he bought the slaves and had them trained, and when once he had got his forces in order, he took to worrying his friends and making their supper miserable, by turning the conversation into channels which enabled him to show off his learning: for, as he justly argued, learning which he had bought and paid for at so high a price assuredly was his own. Such was cramming in the days of the Roman Empire.

In our own day it is not quite the same in form, though, perhaps, there may be more resemblance in substance between the crammer and the crib on the one side and the learned freedmen on the other than we should at first be inclined to admit. But it would be unjust to deny that, given the necessity of preparing for an examination upon the results of which the whole career of a young man probably depends—it is natural,

I may almost say it is inevitable, that special preparation should be made, and that preparation should take the form of a rapid storage of the memory with as many salient pieces of knowledge as possible, due regard being had, not to the education of the mind of the student, but to his being prepared to gain the largest number of marks in the shortest time. I do not desire now to enter into the great question of competitive examinations. It is one on both sides of which there is a great deal to be said, and I am far too sensible of the advantage of the system to use hasty words of a depreciatory character. But this I wish to impress upon you, that, regarding the matter from an educational point of view, learning is too sensitive to be successfully wooed by so rough and so unskilful a process, and that it is only to those who approach her in a reverent and loving spirit and by the regular paths of patient and careful study that she will open the portals of her abode and admit the student to her

heart. It is with her votaries as with those of the leaf in Chaucer's beautiful poem—

“Knights ever should be persévering
To seek honour without feintise or slouth.
Fro well to better in all manner thing,
In sign of which, with leaves aye lasting,
They be rewarded after their degree,
Whose lusty green may not appaired be.”

But, though learning is not to be won by short cuts or royal roads, yet, as the philosopher's stone could turn whatever it touched into gold, so the true lover of literature can, by the alchemy of a sympathetic mind, find the true gold of the intellect in the works to which he applies himself. Recall to yourselves, for example, that well-known epistle in which Horace draws forth the lessons of Homer's great poems, and shows us how the poet teaches the secrets of human life and traces the springs of human action more fully and more excellently than either Chrysippus or Crantor.

Again, take Wordsworth's beautiful lines

on the divinities which the lively Grecian could find in his land of hills, rivers, and fertile fields, and sounding shores. These are but samples of the thousand ways in which the true poetic fancy will detect beauties or lessons which to a less observant eye would be invisible. Or, leaving the realm of fancy, how many unexpected lights upon questions of history and philosophy will reveal to the practised and attentive reader truths and evidences which are all the more striking because they are unconsciously disclosed. Take, for instance, that curious little article—shall I call it?—of Lucian's upon the Pseudomantis, the Charlatan Alexander, whose tricks and devices he exposed, and whose success in imposing upon the incredulous he details. Observe how, quite casually, he remarks that his hero was able to deceive all classes of philosophers except only two sects—the Epicureans and the Christians. He merely mentions the fact so far as concerns the Christians; but how sug-

gestive a fact it is. The Epicurean, who disputed the intervention of the gods in human affairs altogether, might naturally be supposed to be incredulous and proof against superstitious pretensions. But with the Christian it might have been thought that the very reverse was likely to be the case ; and, in truth, his rejection of the wonders of the deceiver was doubtless due, not to scepticism as to spiritual manifestations, but rather to his belief that these things were of the works of the Evil One, and were to be put away as abominable.

But why should I detain you with illustrations of what every reader must soon discover for himself—that the wisdom, the graces, the soul and spirit of a book are as nothing until to that book has been applied a mind and an intelligence capable of drawing forth those charms which, to inferior or less sympathetic spirits, are revealed, if at all, in an inferior degree, and of which we properly

say that they are *φωνᾶντα συνετοῖσιν*. Perhaps there is nothing more noticeable than the treatment which a work of humour, or, it may be, of fancy, receives at the hands of those who are themselves destitute of those qualities. You Scotchmen are often twitted with want of power to perceive a joke, you—the countrymen of Scott and Burns, and of that galaxy of wits who made the society of Edinburgh so famous in days not long gone by! But I am not going to take an illustration from Scotland. I will call into court an Englishman, whose memoirs we are all fond of dipping into at our idlest hours, and never without amusement, and yet whose absolute deficiency in these particulars is unspeakably delightful. Mr. Samuel Pepys seems to be wholly wanting in all sense of the ridiculous and to be equally devoid of any spark of fancy. Here is his estimate of the lightest, gayest, loveliest piece of fancy in the world. “To the King’s Theatre, where we saw *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which I had never

seen before, nor shall ever again, for it is the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life."

We must not, however, confine our attention to works of humour and of fancy alone. They are, indeed, most valuable in the development, perhaps even in the formation, of character, and we cannot but admire and feel grateful for the lessons which they teach us. But they would pall upon us if we sought to make them our sole companions. As Mr. Lowell says of new books :—

" For reading new books is like eating new bread.
One can bear it at first, but by gradual steps he
Is brought to death's door by mental dyspepsy."

So it may be said of books of the lighter class that they would not furnish the mind with the food it requires if our reading were confined to them alone. What, then, ought the young to read? It is, indeed, a grave and serious question, but I am not going to attempt to answer it by prescribing a detailed regimen or course of study. That I must leave to be

decided upon according to the circumstances of the student, the profession which he is about to follow, and the advice which his professors or tutors may give him. If his training is to be mainly scientific, then I would say that it is peculiarly desirable that his reading should be mixed and miscellaneous, so that while he is investigating the secrets of nature he should not neglect to acquaint himself also with the secrets of the human heart. If, on the other hand, his line is to be literary, I would keep the light literature somewhat down, lest by its fascination it should draw away the mind from the more serious studies. It is sure to be taken up later, and with all the more pleasure and profit, if a good foundation has first been laid by steady literary work.

Look some day, if you are not already acquainted with them, at Sir Walter Scott's remarks upon desultory reading in the early chapters of *Waverley*, and take his warning against the dissipation of mind to which, with

some natures at all events, it is likely to lead. I content myself with saying it is one of the great advantages of such places of learning as our Universities that every student has the means of readily obtaining advice, guidance, and assistance in laying out and pursuing a course of serious study. He will here be introduced to the great minds of the past, to the historians, the philosophers, the orators, the poets, whose works have charmed and have instructed generation after generation, and he will be shown how best to employ his time in turning his acquaintance with them to profit. The only piece of advice I would give is one which no doubt he has received from many others. It is, to make a point of mastering at least one subject of study by sheer hard work without the aid of any of the ingenious inventions for saving time and trouble which are so dangerously tempting. Set your faces alike against the use of cribs and translations, and against the skipping of difficult passages. Do not try to turn the flank of a difficulty,

but brace up your minds to overcome it. By doing this with one or more branches of your work you will strengthen your mental powers and gain a vantage ground from which you will be able with ease to invade and conquer the fruitful plains of knowledge which you will perceive lying open before you. As a wit once said, easy writing is confoundedly hard reading ; so we may say of easy study that it means terribly barren knowledge. You may indeed apply to true knowledge the noble lines in which Wordsworth addresses the Grecian crowd who shouted when they heard the proclamation of their country's liberty at the hands of their Conqueror. Those who desire to gain that glorious boon

“ Must either win by effort of their own
The prize, or be content to see it worn
By more deserving brows.”

It is rather tempting at this stage of my observations to open once more the old controversy between the ancients and the moderns and to fight the Battle of the Books

over again. But I am unwilling to do it, because my object is not to set one generation or one country against another, but rather to awaken in you an interest in the literature of all time, and to find the points which authors of different ages and nations have in common, rather than those on which they may be supposed to be at variance. You may remember that the Battle of the Books began by a demand addressed by the moderns to the ancients that the latter, who were the occupants of the higher of the two summits of Mount Parnassus, should either resign their time-honoured occupancy in favour of their younger neighbours, or else should allow the moderns to come and level the hill with their shovels and mattocks to such a height as they might think convenient. This modest proposal was courteously but summarily rejected by the ancients, who, as an alternative, proposed that the moderns should rather occupy themselves by raising their own side of the hill than dream of pulling down the

other. This was excellent advice, applicable, perhaps, to other cases of rivalry besides that of jealous authors; and looking upon the course of events since Dean Swift's days, we may, I think, say that it has on the whole been followed. Assuredly the authors who have arisen both in this country and in others within the last century and a half have done much towards raising the modern standard, while, in spite of the changes which modern education has brought about, in spite of the pressure of scientific competition, in spite of the discouragement of quotations and the banishment of Horace from the House of Commons, ancient learning is still held in high esteem, and year by year fresh excursions are made into its well-known territories, and fresh discoveries are reported from its well-trodden plains.

If modern literature has any competition to dread, it is not that of the old classical writers, but of the daily, weekly, or monthly

periodicals, which fall as thickly round us as the leaves in Vallombrosa, and go near to suffocate the poor victim who is longing to enjoy his volume in peace, whether that volume be of Sophocles or of Shakespeare or of Goethe or of Burns. Or if by chance our would-be student is one who for his sins is engaged in political contests himself, he may recall the position of Walter Scott's Black Knight at the siege of Front de Bœuf's Castle when deafened by the din which his own blows made upon the gate contributed to raise. How, under such circumstances, he must wish that he was like Dicaeopolis, in the *Acharnians*, and could make a separate peace for himself.

But may my good angel preserve me from entering into anything like a controversy with the great periodical Press! It is a mighty engine with a giant's strength, which we can only trust that it may not use like a giant, or at least not like the traditional giant, who is supposed to be given to tyrannous exercise

of his powers. Cowper's lines mark well its excellences and its faults:—

“ How shall I speak thee, or thy power address,
Thou god of our idolatry, the Press?
By thee religion, liberty, and laws
Exert their influence and advance their cause ;
By thee worse plagues than Pharaoh's land befell,
Diffused, make earth the vestibule of hell ;
Thou fountain at which drink the good and wise,
Thou ever bubbling spring of endless lies,
Like Eden's dread probationary tree,
Knowledge of good and evil is from thee.”

Knowledge of good and evil, yes. Whatever may have been the original position of our first parents, we, their descendants, have this knowledge forced upon us, and we cannot escape from it. Our aim and object must be, not to escape or to close our eyes to it, or to keep it out by the method of the wiseacre who shut his park gates against the crows, but to neutralize the evil by seeking out the good, and to strengthen our minds by sound discipline, and purify our taste by the loving study of literature of the nobler

type, so that we may instinctively reject that which is mean and unworthy.

I may leave to yourselves the question of the amount of time you ought to give to the current literature of the day. Much of it is addressed to particular classes of persons and has an interest for them which it does not possess for others. Much, on the other hand, consists of popular renderings of subjects, sometimes admirable and useful to all, sometimes, it is to be feared, of little value or interest for anyone. Habit and a little trying experience will soon teach you to discern how much of a periodical is worth the expenditure of much time. You will not be long before you acquire some skill in the arts of dipping and of skipping.

Of novels I must speak in somewhat the same strain. There is probably no form of idleness so seductive or so enervating to the mind as indiscriminate novel reading. Yet some of the best and most truly instructive works in the world belong to this class.

From *Don Quixote* to *Waverley*, from *The Vicar of Wakefield* to *The Caxtons*, from Miss Austen or Miss Edgeworth or Miss Ferrier to Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot, you will find what Horace found in those great Homeric poems—humour and wisdom, and a keen insight into the strength and the weakness of the human character.

Think what a mine of wealth we possess in the novels of your own great master. What depths he sounds, what humours he makes us acquainted with! From Jeanie Deans sacrificing herself to her sisterly love in all but her uncompromising devotion to truth, to the picture of the family affection and overmastering grief in the hut of poor Steenie Mucklebackit, or again from the fidelity of Meg Merrilies to that of Caleb Balderstone, you have in these and a hundred other instances examples of the great power of discerning genius to seize upon the secrets of the human heart and to reveal the inner meanings of the events which history

records upon its surface, but which we do not feel that we really understand till some finer mind has clothed the dry bones with flesh and blood and presented them to us in appropriate raiment.

I will permit myself to make but one more remark on Sir Walter Scott, for I am always a little in danger of running wild about him, and it is this:—Our ancestors and ancestresses read for their light literature such books as the *Grand Cyrus* and the Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*. I never tried the former. I have made one or two attempts in the latter without much success. But I have sufficient general knowledge of their dimensions and of their character to be sure that no one with a volume of Scott at hand would ever deliberately lay it aside in favour of either of them. May I hope that the same preference which you instinctively afford to him over works such as those I have referred to you will also extend to him in comparison with the great floating mass of unsubstantial

and ephemeral literature, which is in truth undeserving of the name, but which is unfortunately attractive enough to tempt you to choke your minds with inferior rubbish.

And now let me say a few words to you upon poetry. We are told on high authority that the poet is born, not made. Perhaps the same might in a lesser degree be said of his readers also. There are some natures which approach more nearly to the poetic than others, and these can best appreciate the thoughts that underlie a poem and can admire the poet's power of expressing these thoughts in appropriate, perhaps in striking, language. But in almost every one I imagine there are implanted some seeds at least of the faculty of which we speak, and these seeds are capable of cultivation. A man may not be able to make himself a poet, and I am sure we would all join in praying that he may never try ; but he may be able to train himself to understand and to love the poetry of others. Indeed, we cannot doubt that so it must be when we see

how widely spread and among what varying classes of mankind is the thirst for poetry of some kind. The ballad is, I suppose, the simplest and earliest form of it. Scotland and England have alike contributed largely to ballad poetry, and whether your *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* or the English *Reliques of Ancient Poetry* is to be preferred I leave you to judge for yourselves, recommending both collections to your favourable notice. Your older poets are, I suppose, now but little read ; yet I was struck by finding some time ago, when I happened to ask at the London Library for Barbour's great poem on the Bruce, that though the library boasted of three copies they were all three at that moment lent out. I was pleased to think that in these days, when it is as necessary as it ever was to plead the cause of personal freedom, there should be a run upon the book which contains that spirited apostrophe—

“ Ah ! freedom is a noble thing ;
Freedom makes man to have liking ;

Freedom all solace to man gives,
He lives at ease that freely lives.
A noble heart may have none ease,
Nor else nought that may him please,
If freedom fail : for free liking
Is yearned over all other thing."

There has been of late years a striking revival of popularity in the case of Barbour's great contemporary Chaucer. Let us hope that your countryman may have a similar fortune. But we cannot easily rank any one with Chaucer. For variety, for power of description, for touching, tender appeals to the feelings, for genuine though sometimes rather coarse fun, and for delineation of character, he occupies a place in the world of poetry such as few can aspire to.

You have other poets well worthy to be read. Sir David Lindsay, Allan Ramsay, and others will be names with which you are familiar, though perhaps they may not be widely read. But your greatest poet, excluding or not excluding Scott, is one whom all, I trust, find time to study—I mean, of

course, Robert Burns. I am about to quote a sentence or two on the character of Burns's poetry from the work of a friend of mine whom we have lately lost, well known not only as Principal of one of your famous Universities, but also as Professor of Poetry in the University of Oxford, one much valued by all to whom he was known—the late Principal Shairp. This is his judgment :—

“At the basis of all his power lay absolute truthfulness, intense reality, truthfulness with the objects which he saw, truthfulness to himself as the seer of them. Here was a man, a son of toil, looking out on the world from his cottage on society, low and high, and on nature, homely or beautiful, with the clearest eye, the most piercing insight, and the warmest heart, touching life at a hundred points, seeing to the core all the sterling worth, nor less the pretence and hollowness of the men he met, the humour, the drollery, the pathos, and the sorrow of human existence, and expressing what he saw, not in the

stock phrases of books, but in his own vernacular—the language of his fireside—with a directness, a force, a vitality that tingled to the finger-tips and forced the phrases of his peasant dialect into literature and made them for ever classical. Large sympathy, generous enthusiasm, reckless abandonment, fierce indignation, melting compassion, rare flashes of moral insight—all are there. Everywhere you see the strong intellect made alive and driven home to the mark by the fervid heart behind it.”

I will not weaken these vigorous words by any addition of my own. I remember the warning given by Charles Lamb—that it is almost more dangerous for a Southerner to praise Burns to a Scotchman than to dispraise him. But you may well believe that we Englishmen have a true and a warm appreciation of the great poet.

“Non obtusa adeo gestamus pectora.”

I am sure that it must be unnecessary for

me to say anything of the great stream of leading English poets from Shakespeare to Milton, to Dryden, to Pope, to Wordsworth, Scott, and Byron, to Tennyson and Browning. But there are others less universally read to whom I wish to call your attention, especially the great dramatists of or about the Shakespearean age. Ben Jonson probably deserves the first place among them. His racy representations of the follies and oddities, and, as he would call them, the humours, of the day, are balanced by the classical representations which led Milton to speak of "Jonson's learned sock," though there are indeed some of his works which rise almost to the dignity of the buskin. *The Alchemist*, *The Fox*, and *Every Man in his Humour* have made themselves well known. Let me commend to you a less read drama, *Catiline*, in which the story of the great conspiracy is finely told, partly through noble paraphrases of Cicero and Sallust, and partly through the play of the dialogue between the conspirators. If any of

you should be tempted to read it, let him take note of the delicious piece of partly personal, partly political, gossip among the Roman ladies, which leads to the betrayal of the plot. There is another clever Roman play, *The Poetaster*, which would have been a rather appropriate subject for discussion to-night, for it tells the old old tale of the struggle between father and son, when the one enjoins the study of the law and the other flies resolutely to his studies in poetry. There are two beautiful plays of Ford's, *The Broken Heart* and *The Lover's Melancholy*, which bear reading over and over again.

“As for some dear familiar strain
Untired we ask and ask again,
Ever in its melodious store
Finding a spell unheard before.”

Massinger is interesting, and you doubtless know several of his plays by name, if not more intimately.

But I must not linger over these, nor try to find a fit place for Spenser, whom

I honour much and read a little, especially his first three books, or for Marlowe, the pioneer of the English drama, whose delicious song,

“Come live with me and be my love,”

carries one from the crowd and the struggle of life to country scenes worthy of Izaak Walton himself, or for that very little read Drayton, whose great *Polyolbion* seems as if it might have filled the place of *Bradshaw's Guide* to tourists of the *Arcadia* stamp. Let me tell you that you will find a great deal of very good poetry in that same *Polyolbion* if you venture to face it. I am leaving out Cowley and Waller and a hundred more, and I am not even attempting to enter upon the poetry of the eighteenth or of this present nineteenth century, nor upon our prose writers, nor upon the great field of foreign literature, though it is with difficulty that I turn away from those giants of France, Pascal and Molière, from whom there is more to be learnt than from

any two writers of their day, and who will well repay the closest study.

Nor have I said a word of the classics, whom I fear I must group altogether, and bid you

“Nocturnâ versate manu, versate diurnâ.”

It might seem when we are running through a catalogue such as I have been suggesting to you that we are awakening the dead to bear us company. May I quote to you some beautiful lines of Southey's to which he gives the title of *The Scholar* :—

“My days among the dead are passed,
Around me I behold,
Where'er these casual eyes are cast,
The mighty minds of old :
My never failing friends are they
With whom I converse day by day.

“With them I take delight in weal,
And seek relief in woe ;
And while I understand and feel
How much to them I owe,
My cheeks have often been bedewed
With tears of thoughtful gratitude.

“ My thoughts are with the dead ; with them
I live in long past years,
Their virtues love, their faults condemn,
Partake their hopes and fears,
And from their lessons seek and find
Instruction with an humble mind.

“ My hopes are with the dead : anon
My place with them will be,
And I with them shall travel on
Through all futurity ;
Yet leaving here a name, I trust,
That will not perish in the dust.”



AND now, gentlemen, my time is drawing to a close. Believe me it is good for us all occasionally to indulge in such recreation under the shade, even in the midst of a hot day's work. The work will not be the worse done for such a respite. But we must not allow it to be forgotten. Those dead of whom the poet speaks

are not only our companions ; they stand round us like a great cloud of witnesses to mark how we perform the task which has been given us to do, and fight the battle which has been committed to our hands. If there be any slackness or any cowardice on our part, their voices will “ sound like a distant torrent’s fall,” and will reproach our shortcomings. But, if we be honest and valiant, we shall not turn to them in vain for sympathy and for encouragement. Among them we shall find the records of those who have passed through harder trials and accomplished greater deeds than those which are demanded of us. They have, many of them, won eternal fame. Be sure that it did not settle quietly upon their brows. It was won in the only way in which fame can be worth the winning. It was won by labour ; that is the path which they trod. It is the path which you must tread also. I will take my last quotation from one¹ who is well

¹ Professor Stuart Blackie (Edin. Univ.).

known to you all, whom I need not name,
for you will recognize his words at once :—

“ Rocking on a lazy billow,
With roaming eyes,
Cushioned on a dreamy pillow,
Thou art now wise.
Wake the power within thee sleeping,
Trim the plot that’s in thy keeping,
Thou wilt bless the task when reaping
Sweet labour’s prize.”



ERRATUM.

Page 60, line 6, *for* "now" *read* "not."



